

# DOCUMENT FILE

## NOTE

SEE 834.154/53 FOR #648

FROM Ethiopia (Southard) DATED Feb. 24, 1931.  
TO NAME 1-1172

REGARDING: Conversation with Italian Minister who has been  
instructed not to press the Assab-Dessie project.

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865A.15484/3

Addis Ababa,  
Ethiopia.

February 24th, 1931.

No. 648.

The Honorable

The Secretary of State,  
Washington.

Sir:

I have the honor to report that in a recent conversation with my Italian colleague he informed me that he had been instructed from Rome not to press further the Ethiopians for action on the now more or less famous Assab-Dessie road project.

In the Legation's No. 604 of January 5th, 1931, mention is made of the stated intention of the local Italian Minister to obtain from the Emperor of Ethiopia "a show-down" in the matter of the Assab-Dessie project. As later reported my Italian colleague had not been able to elicit any definite statement from the Emperor on this subject.

And

And now he has been instructed not to press it!

There seems to be something curious in the situation which has not yet appeared on the surface. I asked my Italian colleague why his Government had decided not to press further in the Assab-Dessie project and he replied that it didn't seem worth while; that after all the road would be of no great benefit to Italian interests; and, finally, that if such a road should be constructed it would only add further to the present friction between Italy and France in their Ethiopian relations. Perhaps of most significance was his expression of opinion that should the road be built, and the Ethiopian free zone at Assab be opened, the French would certainly counteract its operation by granting to the Ethiopians a free zone at Djibouti. Perhaps my Italian colleague knows more about the latter possibility than he was willing to reveal to me.

However, this apparently changed attitude on the part of the Italians towards the Assab-Dessie development which they announced to the world with such pride and fanfare more than two years ago is particularly interesting. Practically nothing has ever been done on the road, as was from the beginning predicted by this Legation, and now development of any kind appears again to have been indefinitely postponed. As has been commented by the Legation the economic value of such a road has never been indisputably established. Its construction

tion would undoubtedly hamper the further development of Ethiopia's one and only railway — the Franco-Ethiopian line from Addis Ababa to the coast. It is far from efficient, but if left alone there will gradually be built up sufficient traffic to justify expenditures for improvements without which it will always give a service materially below average.

Respectfully yours,

  
ADDISON E. SOUTHARD.

File 815.4.  
AES/sid.



# DOCUMENT FILE

## NOTE

SEE 884.154/54 FOR #765

FROM Ethiopia ( Southard ) DATED July 20<sup>th</sup>, 1931  
TO NAME 1-1127 o p o

### REGARDING:

Italian efforts to have a road constructed from Eritrea into  
Ethiopia. Italian interest in the Assab-Bessie road.

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865A.15484/4

Addis Ababa,  
Ethiopia.

July 30th, 1951.

CONFIDENTIAL.

No. 765.

The Honorable

The Secretary of State,  
Washington.

Sir:

I have the honor to enclose herewith translation of an excerpt from the NUOVO ITALIA published at Paris on May 12th, 1951, which is particularly interesting in that it seems related to various suggestions made in previous reports from this Legation as to Italian aims and ambitions in linking up its Eritrean highways with similar routes to be constructed in Ethiopia.

This published statement of Italian aims fits in rather well with a lately reopened agitation by the local Italian Legation for a more active consideration by the Ethiopians of the proposed Asseb-Bessie Road. Surveys of  
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the route have now been made by two Dutch engineers in the employ of the Ethiopian Government, and my Italian colleague is quite optimistic that something in the way of actual construction may soon be accomplished. While he has made no definite statement to me to that effect I have been able without too much imagination to extract from his conversation an interpretation which indicates that the Italians have already suggested to the Emperor of Ethiopia their willingness to put up the money for the road construction.

My Italian colleague has during the last few months devoted himself energetically to the cultivation of Ethiopian goodwill by much entertaining and -- as strongly indicated by various circumstances -- by the distribution of tactful largesse in one form or another.

In the third paragraph of the attached translation there is mentioned the desirability of a highway into Ethiopia from the north via Sokota, Makallé and Adowa. This leaves unmentioned, probably purposely, the place of Dessie further south. Dessie is the terminus of the proposed route in from Assab. The Ethiopians have always quite firmly refused to consider any Italian highway penetration from the north, but they have toyed with the idea of a road in from Assab, southern Eritrea, to Dessie. The Legation knows that local Italian representation secretly thinks the accomplishment of a road in from Assab to Dessie as potentially much in favor of getting the Ethiopians to consider the proposed linking of Dessie to Eritrea on the north by  
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the route suggested in the attached article. Hence their continued eagerness to get something done on the Assab-Bessie route which is not in itself so important but which might open the way to the greater Italian ambition for tapping Ethiopia from the northern frontier and thus make the port of Massowah a clearing house for central and northern Ethiopian trade. The plan is a logical one under present circumstances.

Italian ambition to develop large parts of Ethiopia through their Colony of Eritrea has always been very evident, and it now appears that there is approaching a comparatively "do or die" stage of activity for its realization.

Respectfully yours,

  
ADDISON A. SOUTHARD.

1 Enclosure.

815.4.  
AES/sid.

A true copy of  
the signed original  
per 

Three copies to E. I. C., Paris.



FROM NUOVA ITALIA. Paris. May 12th. 1931.

The roads of communication departing from Eritrea, writes Mr. Salvadori, should go toward two regions.

The first should follow the line of one of the trails already existing and put Asmara and Massowah into rapid communication with the basin of Lake Tsana which is destined to become the center of a great agricultural development.

A second route or road should follow the line already established by a caravan trail which runs from Asmara in Eritrea via Sokota, Makallé and Adowa, and can join our Red Sea ports to the eastern and central zone of the high plateau where a rather dense population lives and whose natural conditions particularly favor cattle raising.

The more extended relations which can be opened, thanks to an improvement of communications, between our colony and the high Ethiopian plateau will have a doubly advantageous effect. They will permit the social and economic progress of the Abyssinian people who will come into closer contact with Italian civilization, and they will be a source of welfare and of material prosperity for our colony, contributing at the same time to the increased importance of our Eritrean ports. That is moreover the only means of separating from (other?) foreign influences the vast and rich regions of the high Ethiopian plateau.

Central File: Decimal File 865A.154, Internal Affairs Of States, Public Works., Eritrea, Roads. Streets. Highways. Paving., Feb. 24, 1931 - July 20th, 1931. February 24 - July 20, 1931. MS European Colonialism in the Early 20th Century. National Archives (United States). Archives Unbound, [link.gale.com/apps/doc/FSC5109731234/FGDSC?Fu=Domni&sid=bookmark-GDSC](https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/FSC5109731234/FGDSC?Fu=Domni&sid=bookmark-GDSC). Accessed 18 June 2025.